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ABSTRACT

A total of 106 college graduates who had taken a basic communication course was surveyed to obtain their perspectives on communication training. Although the alumni rated communication skills as being highly important, three-fourths of them did not receive communication training after college. Most of the alumni felt either "fairly well" or "okay" about how speech classes prepared them for communication on their jobs. Although all communication skills were rated as important, interpersonal skills were rated somewhat higher than public speaking skills. The alumni preferred a hybrid interpersonal communication and public speaking course to any basic course with a single topic. (RL)

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ALUMNI PERSPECTIVES ON SPEECH COMMUNICATION TRAINING:
IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNICATION FACULTY*

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Shrinking university resources in the 1980's make it increasingly important for communication faculty to clearly demonstrate worthwhile contributions to student education. Communication skills are fortunately ranked high among skills necessary for occupational success by training personnel, business executives, and a variety of university students and alumni.¹ The ability to demonstrate that communication courses fulfill an expressed educational need provides a strong argument for university support. Recent studies of alumni at the University of Minnesota, however, suggest that communication faculty may not be able to make a "satisfaction of needs" argument.² Liberal arts alumni rated oral and written communication skills as almost equally important, but were much less satisfied with skills obtained in oral than they were in written communication. In addition, more business administration alumni rated oral communication skills as "very important" than written communication skills. The number who felt they were "very well prepared" in oral communication skills, however, was less than one-third that of those who felt they were "very well prepared" in written communication skills.

A major limitation of these studies is that they do not clearly show whether or not alumni had actually taken communication courses in college.³ Of eight studies conducted in the past seven years, only one asked if alumni had taken any communication courses.⁴ None systematically selected former communication students to be respondents. The purpose of this study is to obtain feedback from alumni regarding their communication education. Only alumni who completed at least one basic communication

course in college were surveyed to obtain alumni ratings of the importance of speech communication, indications of the adequacy of speech courses to prepare them for communication on the job, and evaluations and recommendations for course content. Subjects were 106 alumni, randomly selected from the rosters of 1972-73 and 1973-74 basic speech communication courses, who participated in a telephone survey. At the time alumni took the basic course 14 were freshmen, 60 were sophomores, 22 were juniors, and 10 were seniors. Respondents were enrolled in 40 majors in five different colleges. Since one purpose of this study was to assess attitudes toward communication at work, only currently employed alumni were included. Table 1 summarizes the 21 occupations of persons participating in the survey. To insure that respondents were former communication students, alumni were asked if they had taken at least one basic communication course. More had taken public speaking (93%) than interpersonal communication (9%).

The survey included 17 items and took between five and ten minutes to administer over the telephone. Interviewers were six female undergraduate students who were trained to administer surveys in a consistent manner. Interviewers were supervised while surveys were being conducted. Interviews were conducted between February 3-13, 1980 in the afternoon and early evening hours. Surveys were completed with 73% of the alumni who had working telephone numbers.

Alumni were first asked to rate English, psychology, sociology, and speech in terms of its importance to success in work along a three

point scale: (1) not important, (2) somewhat important, (3) highly important. English received the highest rating ($\bar{x}$ = 2.49), speech the next highest rating ($\bar{x}$ = 2.38), followed by psychology ($\bar{x}$ = 1.90) and sociology ($\bar{x}$ = 1.67). These results are comparable to those of an earlier study of graduates from the industrial administration department at Iowa State University.⁵ These alumni gave speech an average rating of 2.69 on a three point scale which was second only to English ($\bar{x}$ = 2.71) in a list of 20 different kinds of coursework. Table 2 shows that the pattern of responses is similar for both studies.⁶ These results are consistent with recommendations for general education requirements made by alumni of the Liberal Arts and Sciences College of the University of Kansas in which more respondents supported increasing requirements for English and speech than any other general requirement.⁷

The significance of communication coursework is underscored by results of surveys of skills important to occupational success. The College of Business Administration at the University of Minnesota found that 92% of surveyed graduates rated speech skills as very important.⁸ This rating was higher than for any other skill area. In another study, the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Minnesota found that 83% of alumni surveyed felt oral communication skills were important to their education.⁹ Only ability to think clearly (93%) and written communication skills (87%) were deemed more important. A survey by the College Placement Council also found that oral communication skills were more important for occupations than most other skills.¹⁰

The second item stated: "Please give me an estimate of the number of hours you have received in speech communication training since you left college." The average number of hours of communication training for all alumni was 5.3 hours. This statistic is somewhat misleading, however, since the vast majority (76%) received no training after college. These results are somewhat surprising because the amount of communication training available in business and industry has increased in the past few years.¹¹ Even more surprising, many persons in occupations highly dependent upon communication received no training. All of the journalists and physicians, and approximately 80% of the teachers, salespersons, and managers indicated they had received no communication training after college. The only professions in which more than half the respondents received training were lawyers (100%) and bankers (60%). The number of people included in this survey is too small to draw definite conclusions. The results, however, suggest that universities may be the only place where alumni that are highly dependent upon communication skills will have ready access to communication training.

The next question asked: "How adequately did your college speech courses prepare you for the kind of communication in which you engage in your work?" The largest number of alumni felt that speech courses had prepared them "fairly well" for occupational communication (39%), followed by "okay" (35%), "extremely well" (10%), "not very well" (8%), and "not at all" (8%). These results appear to be comparable to those of business administration alumni at the University of Minnesota.¹² Only 8% of those with bachelor's degrees and 14% of those with masters degrees thought they were "very well prepared" in oral communication.

Similarly, only 6% of those with bachelor's degrees and 8% of those with MBA degrees felt they were "very well prepared" in interpersonal skills. The similar ratings of preparation in the present and former studies suggest that alumni who have taken a speech course feel no better prepared than students who have not.¹³ Certainly, when administrators compare the percentage of alumni who felt they were "very well prepared" in English after receiving a bachelor's degree in business (22%) and an MBA (43%),¹⁴ they will question arguments for requiring communication courses.

A response to skeptical administrators is suggested by the results of this and other studies. First, students are unlikely to receive communication training after college, at least during the first few years on the job. Therefore, it is imperative they receive communication coursework in college. Second, alumni highly value oral communication skills and desire more general requirements for speech. If students were required to understand and use oral communication skills as they are required to do with written communication skills, they would undoubtedly feel better prepared in oral communication. Finally, results presented later in this paper suggest that required communication courses might be altered to more adequately meet occupational needs. Thus, requirements for communication courses should not be diminished, but altered to meet needs and sufficiently required to provide practice necessary to ingrain skills.

The next item assessed the relationship between success on the job and eight kinds of communication (communication climate, group communication, interpersonal communication, interviewing, leadership communication, message flow, presentational speaking, and written

communication). The title and a description of each category were read to respondents and they rated each along a three point scale: (1) not important, (2) somewhat important, and (3) very important. All of the communication categories received relatively high ratings (the low mean rating was 2.17, the high 2.59 on a three point scale). Alumni rated interpersonal communication as being most important to success on the job ($\bar{x} = 2.69$), followed by communication climate ($\bar{x} = 2.55$), leadership communication ($\bar{x} = 2.54$), message flow ($\bar{x} = 2.41$), and small group communication ($\bar{x} = 2.38$). Categories receiving lesser ratings were written communication ($\bar{x} = 2.34$), followed by interviewing ($\bar{x} = 2.28$), and presentational speaking ($\bar{x} = 2.17$).

The categorization of communication activities used in this study originated from an earlier survey of organizational trainers.¹⁵ The most frequently used communication topics for trainers were leadership communication (68%), followed by interpersonal communication (61%), communication climate (53%), and interviewing (51%). Topics mentioned less frequently were message flow (40%), written communication (38%), group communication (37%), and presentational speaking (35%).

Both alumni in this study and organizational trainers place most importance on communication topics that are more informal and personal in nature: interpersonal communication, leadership communication, and communication climate. Less importance is given by both to formal and impersonal modes of communication: written communication and presentational speaking. The major differences in evaluations are that organizational trainers view interviewing as a more important topic than alumni; and

alumni view group discussion as a more important topic than trainers. Message flow is viewed as moderately important by both groups.

The results provided above are generally substantiated by the response to an open-ended question that was included in the present survey. Alumni specified one topic in communication training that would be most beneficial to them in their work.¹⁶ The most popular topic was interpersonal communication (36%), followed by public speaking (29%), interviewing (13%), small group communication (13%), written communication (10%), leadership communication (7%) and all skills (2%). Thus, when alumni choose one topic for training as opposed to rating all topics, they choose public speaking more frequently and leadership communication less frequently than ratings of communication categories would suggest. Though both are viewed as important, interpersonal skills are still chosen more frequently as a topic for training than public speaking.

The next question asked alumni their preference for a basic communication course. Over half (54%) preferred a combination of interpersonal and public speaking, followed by a number of different options (33%), interpersonal communication (8%), and public speaking (4%). A related question asked how many interpersonal activities and speeches should be included in the basic course. Most alumni (55% for interpersonal activities - 50% for speeches) desired 4-6 activities for both kinds of assignments, followed by for 1-3 activities (31% for interpersonal activities - 41% for speeches) and more than 6 activities (11% for interpersonal activities - 9% for speeches).

Overall, alumni prefer a basic course which includes both interpersonal and public speaking skills with more emphasis placed on interpersonal skills. The most recent survey of current practices in the basic course indicates that most offer public speaking alone (51%); followed by a combination of public, interpersonal, and small group communication (40%); and interpersonal communication (5%).¹⁷ Clearly, most schools are not in tune with the needs expressed by alumni in this study.

This study surveyed alumni who had taken a basic communication course in college to obtain their perspectives on communication training. Although alumni rate communication skills as being highly important, three-fourths do not receive communication training after college. Most alumni feel either "fairly well" or "okay" about how well speech classes prepared them for communication on the job. Although all communication skills are rated as important, interpersonal skills are rated somewhat higher than public speaking skills. Alumni prefer a hybrid interpersonal communication and public speaking course to any single topic basic course. Communication faculty seem justified in pressing for communication requirements; however, courses should be adapted to the occupational needs of students.

Footnotes

¹ Sources not cited elsewhere in this study include Vincent DiSalvo, David C. Larsen and William J. Seiler, "Communication Skills Needed by Persons in Business Organizations," Communication Education, 25 (Nov. 1975), 169-175; Michael S. Hanna, "Speech Communication Training Needs in the Business Community," Central States Speech Journal, 29 (Fall, 1978), 161-172; Janis E. Meister and N. L. Reinsch, Jr., "Communication Training in Manufacturing Firms," Communication Education, 27 (Sept. 1978), 233-244; Dan H. Swensen, "The Relative Importance of Business Communication Skills for the Next Ten Years," Journal of Business Communication, 17 (Winter, 1980) 41-49.

² Edward Foster et al., "A Market Study for the College of Business Administration, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities," Minneapolis: College of Business Administration, University of Minnesota, November, 1980 (multilith); Carol H. Pazandak, "Followup Survey of 1973 Graduates, College of Liberal Arts," Minneapolis: College of Liberal Arts, University of Minnesota, February, 1977 (multilith).

³ In the 1978-79 University of Minnesota catalogue the College of Liberal Arts and the College of Business Administration, students could choose oral communication courses as an option to fill a general education requirement.

⁴ The study that did ask alumni if they had taken communication courses was James W. Lohr, "Alumni Use of Communicative Activities for the Basic Course: A Survey," Speech Teacher, 23 (Sept. 1974), 248-251. Lohr found that 85% of the alumni surveyed in his study had taken the basic course. Other alumni studies not mentioned

elsewhere in this paper include N. L. Ochsner and Lewis C. Solomon, College of Education and Employment--the Recent Graduates, (Bethlehem, Pa.: The College Placement Council Foundation, 1979); "Instruction in Communication at Colorado State University," Fort Collins: College of Engineering, Colorado State University, July, 1979 (multilith). A summary of some results from these and other surveys can be found in Samuel L. Becker and Leah R. V. Ekdorf, "That Forgotten Basic Skill: Oral Communication," Iowa Journal of Speech Communication, 12 (Fall 1980) 1-18.

⁵Barbara A. Magill, Roger P. Murphey and Lilian O. Feinberg, "Industrial Administration Shows a Need for Communication Study," American Business Communication Association Bulletin, 38 (Summer, 1975).

⁶Twenty different kinds of coursework were rated in the Magill, Murphey and Feinberg study. Only four were selected for comparison in this study to shorten length of telephone surveys. Differences in means of the four items used in both surveys may be due to the way questions were worded. Magill et al. asked respondents to rate areas of coursework as being (1) not useful at all, (2) only slightly important, or (3) very important. In this survey respondents were asked to rate categories as being (1) not important, (2) somewhat important, or (3) highly important.

⁷Jack Langrebe and Howard Baumgartel, "Results of the Graduation Requirement Questionnaire for the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Alumni," Lawrence: College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Kansas (typescript).

- ⁸Foster et al., (multilith).
- ⁹Pazandak, (multilith).
- ¹⁰Ann Stouffer Bisconti and Lewis C. Solomon, College Education on the Job--The Graduate's Viewpoint (Bethlehem, Pa.: The College Placement Council Foundation, 1976).
- ¹¹For example, James M. Lahiff and John D. Hatfield, "The Winds of Change and Managerial Communication Practices," Journal of Business Communication, (1978) 19-28; James E. Wasylik, Lyle Sussman and Robert P. Leri, "Communication Training as Perceived by Training Personnel," Communication Quarterly, (Winter 1976) 32-38.
- ¹²Foster et al., (multilith).
- ¹³Foster et al. reported only ratings of selves as being "very well prepared" making it impossible to compare distributions of ratings with those obtained in this survey.
- ¹⁴Foster et al., (multilith).
- ¹⁵The communication categories used in this study were derived from a survey of communication topics used by organizational trainers. See Linda L. Putnam, "Role Functions and Role Conflicts of Communication Trainers," Journal of Business Communication, 17 (Fall 1979) 37-52.
- ¹⁶See Swensen for results to a similar question. Findings are quite similar.
- ¹⁷James W. Gibson, Charles R. Gruner, Michael S. Hanna, Mary-Jeanette Smythe, and Michael T. Hayes, "The Basic Course in Speech at U.S. Colleges and Universities:III," Communication Education, 29 (1980), 1-9.

Table 1
Respondent Occupations

Occupation	N	Occupation	N
Teacher	23	Journalism	3
Sales	16	Lawyer	2
Engineering	10	Dietition	2
Accounting	8	Computer Programmer	2
Manager	7	Buyer	2
Farmer	5	Lab Technician	2
Banker	5	Personnel	2
Interior Design	4	Sherrif	1
Physician/Veterinarian	4	Pilot	1
Construction	4	Home Economist	1

Table 2
Evaluations of Importance of Curriculum
to Occupations

Coursework	1973 Alumni Mean	1973 Senior Mean	1980 Alumni Mean
English	2.713	2.480	2.491
Speech	2.693	2.469	2.377
Economics	2.574	2.531	-----
Mathematics	2.495	2.163	-----
Computer Sciences	2.495	2.388	-----
Statistics	2.347	2.296	-----
Psychology	2.220	1.948	1.896
Industrial Engi- neering	2.130	1.915	-----
Sociology	2.040	1.896	1.670
Journalism and Advertising	1.830	1.681	-----
Political Science	1.554	1.639	-----
History	1.510	1.268	-----
Philosophy	1.490	1.394	-----
Chemistry	1.420	1.292	-----
Physics	1.390	1.258	-----
Agriculture	1.350	1.359	-----
Foreign Language	1.327	1.268	-----
Biology	1.170	1.258	-----
Botany	1.141	1.129	-----
Anthropology	1.080	1.174	-----